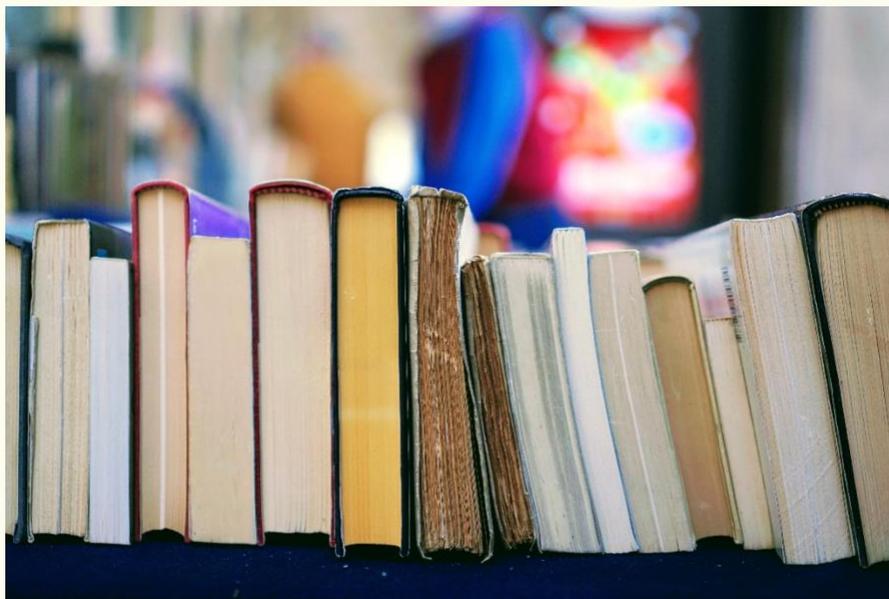


Spellerverse 2021 Summer Edition

In this edition, peruse speller/typer reviews of good summer reads by Peter Tran on Bronte, Emma Cladis on Tolkien, and Otto Lana on Martel. We close the issue not with a review, but an original short story by one of our own speller/typers, Woody Brown. Turns out that a major theme in all of the works in this edition, reviewed or original, is agency. Enjoy reading the thoughts of our authors on this value, so near and dear to the hearts of our members!



***Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte**
and
***Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys**

Review by Peter Tran

I recommend Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre," a mid-19th century Victorian classic. The plot is about an orphan who survives a traumatic childhood to become a governess of the ward of the mysterious master, Edward Rochester, of an English manor called Thornfield Hall. Ostensibly the rest of the novel is about the ups and downs of their romance, but the real themes are the coming of age and agency of an unusual Victorian heroine. Jane is ahead of her times in some ways as a feminist but is also a timeless protagonist because of her integrity and honesty. Bronte's inner psychological portrait of Jane is compelling, convincing, and empowering. I hope you learn as much as I did from Jane.

An interesting pairing with this book is "Wide Sargasso Sea" by Jean Rhys, a modernist/postmodernist writer. She writes this prequel to "Jane Eyre" to give voice to one of the minor but one of the most pivotal and intriguing characters in Jane Eyre, a woman with mental illness. The best way to describe the heroine is as one critic put it, "vulnerable, sensitive, and self-defeating." The title of the book refers to the mysterious Sargasso Sea near the island setting of the book which is in the Bermuda Triangle, a body of water not defined by shores, but a mass of sargassum seaweed infamous for entangling the motors and rudders of ships. The

main point of the novel is that one's identity is largely formed by the regard and expectations of others. Since the heroine is a Creole rejected by both the blacks and whites on her island, though she is rich and beautiful, she's sunk so to speak, fated for misunderstanding and maltreatment because of the prejudices around her. A comparison of the heroines is very instructive. Jane is neither beautiful nor rich, but what self-agency she has! She taught me to appreciate the qualities of being strong-willed and feisty! She also made me realize the crucial importance of at least some good role models and truth speakers in a person's life. So don't underestimate the good you can do! Revolt against Rhys' thesis and keep fighting to communicate and change prejudice and keep the faith!



Photo by Annie Spratt

Tolkien the Evangelist: A Review of Two Fairy Tales

By Emma Cladis

After reading many journals about J.R.R. Tolkien and the reviews on his works, I'm left with the sense that most researchers have not taken how serious Tolkien was about being a strong evangelist. His Christian and Catholic views are well documented but showing how he shares his faith in his stories are not often taken to the ultimate and full conclusion. I see in Tolkien's writings that he opens the reader's mind to salvation. This review and proposal further discuss that Tolkien consciously or unconsciously witnessed Christ throughout his writing. This influence continues with every one of his stories. Tolkien has not been fully recognized for being the evangelist he indeed was and is. By way of his remarkable fairy-tale writing talent, Tolkien leads readers into the enchantment of his Faerie realm. When entered in with belief, this place is supernatural and can be filled with the Holy Spirit. Taking readers to Faerie is a powerful way to evangelize the most unsuspecting reader. Readers are drawn into this world that is new and full of wonder. They are invited to look and see how we "ought" to see. They can see

clearly once removed from the familiar and have the opportunity to challenge their beliefs and to even meet God.

I will review two of Tolkien's fairy tale stories, "Smith of Wooten Major" and "Leaf by Niggle," to show how he takes the reader to his fantasy "secondary world." Tolkien's short stories are full of his Christianity; it fills and influences his writing, and sharing his faith appears to be the obvious outcome. Tolkien makes a place for God's incarnation to be experienced, and he reveals that God is with us and allows the reader to follow God's presence.

I think before we jump into Tolkien's writing, it is essential to explain what I mean by an evangelist. This is not Billy Graham, the famous preacher speaking from a stage. But, it is that Tolkien was in his own way sharing the gospel by writing it in a different new form so the reader could be open to hearing it in a new way. The Oxford dictionary defines evangelism as "the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness." I am referring, of course, to his personal witness. I believe Tolkien often went to Faerie or the Secondary World instead of just staying in this primary earthly realm. In other words, he knew how being in God's presence was, and his writing bears witness to that place so others could find it. Another Christian writer, Sam Chan, explains evangelism in his book *Evangelism in a Skeptical World* this way, "The essence of evangelism is the message that Jesus Christ is Lord. Evangelism is our human effort of proclaiming

this message—which necessarily involves using our human communication, language, idioms, metaphors, stories, experiences, personality, emotions, context, culture, locatedness—and trusting and praying that God, in his sovereign will, will supernaturally use our human and natural means to affect his divine purposes"

(24). I think because of his faith, this was what Tolkien's ultimate intention in his fantasy writing was. I am not talking about just allegories about the Spiritual realm. Through Tolkien's writing gift, he takes the reader into a supernatural experience, where they enter the Spiritual world or realm created in his fairy stories.

I could not find papers where Tolkien's Christianity was in question with the critics, but they do not emphasize the ever-present evangelistic overlay of his writings. Tolkien's writings were not just to entertain but to share his insights about the other realm and God. According to Ralph Wood's journal on C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, he portrays Lewis as the evangelist and Tolkien as a strong Christian but wouldn't call him an evangelist. I don't see it this way. I see that the two men just had different approaches; they were both evangelizing in their own ways.

Next, it is good to tell the story of "Smith of Wootten Major." It is this magical story about the main character, Smith, who swallows a supernatural star in a piece of cake at a festival. The Star eventually settles on his forehead and is the key into this enchanted land of Faerie. The enchantment all begins with the Star.

"(Smith) looked out the window, and the world seemed quiet and expectant. A little breeze, cool and fragrant, stirred the waking Tree. Then the dawn came, and far away, he heard the dawn-song of the birds beginning, growing as it came towards him, filling all the land around the house, and passed on like a wave of music into the West, as the sun rose above the rim of the world. "It reminds me of Faery," he heard himself say, but in Faery, the people sing too." Then he began to sing, high and clear, in strange words that he seemed to know by heart" (22 & 23). Smith has many adventures going to Faery but stays living in the earthly village of Wootten. As a passport into Faerie, the Star makes him able to come and go from Faerie as he pleased. The Star also continues to have the power to change Smith in all good ways in his personality. In the end, he gives the Star to another child who will carry on the tradition of living in both worlds and bringing Faerie to the village.

This shows that we too can walk in the earthly world and the Spirit world, being changed by God in us as we do this. But, I believe this story goes beyond the many metaphors and symbols found in it. Josh Long writes about this, saying that the reader goes into the enchantment of the story, which takes over as they adventure with Smith into Faerie. He notes that "Smith's first encounter with the Star is life changing and transformational... Evidently, his vision has been transformed; Faery has changed how he sees the world at large" (94). Tolkien often

spoke and wrote about "recovery" as an essential part of his fairy stories.

"Recovery is a re-gaining-regaining of a clear view" (Tolkien 2014). Researcher David Mosley discusses the meaning of recovery as a clearer vision that leads to new imaginations. He says this new vision can possibly lead to finding a better understanding of God (7). I agree, but he does not say how recovery occurs or what the clear vision might show us. I see recovery as the wonder setting in and opening the reader's minds and hearts to new possibilities. Just as Faerie renews sight or we see for the first time, or as Tolkien says, as we were "meant" to see, so too when a person becomes a Christian, they see something clearly that then leads them to Christ. Tolkien's recovery gives the reader this opportunity to journey and discover.

Eric Graff adds to the discussion about Smith by saying that this story, more than any others of Tolkiens, "employs the face of Magic directly towards Nature" (16). He explains that nature is our experience of the physical world. This world is only a shadow of the ideal or real. The Magic of nature conjures up the divine, and when these shadows intermingle, the result is the image of God (16). The "magic" Graff refers to here, I think, is how often Tolkien used the Magic and divine in nature, mixed with fantasy, to take the reader to Faery.

Next, I want to review another fantastic story of Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle". The main character in this story is Niggle, the painter; the story describes an artist's

life. At first, Niggle is home with all of his mundane daily routine, and he is not great at his work even though he is obsessed with it. He is also not good with how he spends his time. Next, he goes on this journey that he has known about but is not prepared for. At the first stop of the journey, he ends up in a workhouse for a while, doing hard labor until the final phase of his journey comes, and he is permitted to enter Heaven. Heaven is a beautiful land where he finds his Tree painting. It is now a real tree and perfect. After working in Heaven for a while, "They saw a man, he looked like a shephard; he was walking towards them, down the grass-slope that led up into the Mountains. 'Do you want a guide?' he asked. Do you want to go on?" (37) Niggle's journey had not ended.

Michael Organ writes about the message of the Leaf by Niggle as being a positive one and the characters reaching their full spiritual potential by working their way into Heaven. I think, unfortunately, he goes wrong in saying that working to gain Heaven is the message of Niggle. Tolkien was Catholic and believed in purgatory; hence the workhouse Niggle went to for a while. I see the end of the story of Niggle being the story's point, to find God, but by grace, not by works. Niggle went to Heaven after a voice in the workhouse had mercy on him. He had worked hard, but it could have gone either way (7&8).

Craig Boyd also waters down the central message of Leaf by Niggle. He discusses the story from the perspective of hope. I do agree that this story brings

hope, but he sees that it is mainly about morals. That Niggle has to overcome being idle and overly occupied with work. These are admirable moral lessons within the story but again, not the main takeaway. Niggle takes his journey to find God, and the reader goes along too. In the end, Niggle goes further into the mountains with a Sheppard; and, this invites us to go there also.

Alfred Suellen goes heavily into the Tree in the Niggle story and the religious representations of it. He feels that to the Christian, the Tree would symbolize the Tree of Knowledge from the book of Genesis (4). As a Christian, I think the Tree is far more the representation of the cross of Christ. The Tree was what made it possible for Niggle to be called and was there for him at the end in Heaven. Forgive this critic; he definitely does not go far enough in his evaluation of what the story is identifying.

There are a few other researchers who are noteworthy on this subject. They are not saying the word evangelism but are highlighting the ways Tolkien witnessed through his writings. Janet Brennan Croft says so well that we are drawn and enter into a special Holy place in Tolkien's stories. "And there is often (though not always) a feeling of joining a world already in progress, that will continue after one leaves....but entered into not at one's own instigation but at the near-irresistible invitation of something outside oneself" (5). He believes Tolkien writes to have the power to awaken a longing inside of us. The Bible says in 1 John 4:19, "We love

because He first loved us" (New International Version). This scripture is a clear message to respond to and addresses this longing inside a person. Similarly, researcher Holly Ordway describes this longing as something that Tolkien's writing calls up. "Tolkien's representation of Heaven evokes rather than describes; the story does not represent Heaven so much as it shows us Niggle's response to it" (16).

In speaking about Tolkien from his biography, Humphrey Carpenter describes Tolkien as an explorer who was given a gift from God, a glimpse of the real. He was trying to record and share its underlining reality or truth (35).

Another researcher who indirectly supports my evangelism thesis is Margret Sammons in her paper on fantasy. "One of the great frustrations in studying fantasy is simply defining what it is. J.R.R. Tolkien had a quite specific and even unusual definition of fantasy, where it comes from, who receives the gift of the creative imagination, and what effect it has on the receiver" (3). Here, she not only lays out Tolkien's definition of fantasy but also a clear path to salvation. Tolkien surely understood what he was saying or implying by this.

Colin Duriez talked about the friendship between C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien in his paper on *Tolkien and the Other Inklings*. Lewis was not a believer when they first started being friends, but he says that Tolkien helped Lewis come

to faith. Here we have a critical real-life example of Tolkien being an evangelist with his friend.

The Faerie experience is challenging to explain in words. It shows Tolkien's genius that with God's help, he was able to write in a way that was not only a good fairy story but also had this ability to transform the reader into another realm. This new realm can be a Spiritual place that can lead to a person being open to finding God. In *On Fairy Stories*, Tolkien described "colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable details of a story" (2014). All of this and his excellent fantasy storylines all added to the making of Faerie. Tolkien's witness is not overt evangelism but covert experience evangelism within his stories. We all think that evangelism can only be done one or two specific ways, but I see from reading Tolkien that the power of the Holy Spirit was on him when he wrote. He had a gift to tell a story that would take the reader to a supernatural place that they could decide to go further on their spiritual journey; I believe for many to find God.

Comment by Peter Tran: Yes, I agree with you, Emma, that Tolkien tries to open our eyes to see God better through his stories. It's neat how God is deeply involved and present in both stories, but stays mostly hidden to give the main characters greater agency.

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Photo by Haywood Magee, Getty

A Boy by Any Other Name

A Review of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

By Otto Lana

The first gift a child receives upon birth is their name. Parents lament over the importance and significance of the name. What the name will represent and how the name will forge the first step in their child's lifelong journey is the massive weight this decision carries. A child's name is the first chapter of their personal narrative, the framework of their first landscape. Piscine Molitor Patel is the main character in Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*. Piscine Molitor is the grandest pool in all of Paris. Early in the story, Piscine decides to change his name to Pi. This small act of shortening his given name from Piscine to Pi demonstrates Pi's ability to adapt to a changing environment and speaks to his will to survive.

Survival of the fittest is only part of Darwin's theory of evolution. The fittest species is the one that can adapt to a changing environment. Piscine was proud his name was related to the narrative of a champion swimmer and a great man.

Piscine, a beautiful pool in Paris, is tainted by the taunts of schoolyard bullies' misplaced accent and mispronunciation. A sparkling body of water becomes a foul waste product of urine. Piscine is mutated to pissing. "It is true that those we meet can change us, sometimes so profoundly that we are not the same afterwards, even unto our names...I was twelve...He raised his arm, pointed at me, and shouted, "It's *Pissing Patel!*" (20). Pi did not try to stop the bullies. He instead adapted to the changing environment. He refused to be the victim. "I planned my escape...I put it to execution on the very first day of school, in the very first class' (21). Piscine killed his given name and buried it with the teasing. A new name and a new identity were born that day. Pi continued this throughout the day. Each class had a greater description and more numbers added to the numerical equivalent of π . He reinforced his new name and his new identity each time. By the end of that first day in his new school, he is no longer associated with a vulnerable creature relieving itself of waste but instead Greek letter. He was no longer a victim; he was a trendsetter. Several of his classmates took to this rebranding effort and began to form new identities adapting Greek letters as their names. He chose to adapt and survive. He changed the narrative around his name.

Pi must embrace and embody this new identity he created. He must change more than just his name to survive this new environment. Surviving the taunts of schoolyard bullies is one thing, but surviving alone in the open ocean is quite

another. Pi survived his name-calling days of elementary school, the literal survival after his entire life as he knew it was washed away, lost to the ocean's depths due to a sinking ship, is survival on a whole new level. It is the difference between life and death. That first day of Pi's new identity is more than a lesson in geometry, "I drew a large circle, which I then sliced in two with a diameter" (23). This line divides a circle into two halves but also represents the difference between life and death. The line also represents the difference of hope and despair in the ability to survive. Without hope, survival is impossible. Pi embraces survival and realizes the conditions were perfect for training a wild tiger, it is all about perceived circumstances for Pi as he surveys his surroundings and finds the lifeboat is similar to a circus ring. Embracing his new role as an alpha male, the only role he can embody if he is to survive in a lifeboat with an apex predator. Once again dictating his destiny through adaptation to a changing environment.

Adaptation and survival is an ongoing continuum, a dynamic system of assessment and review. Constantly formulating ideas, calculating plans, and executing actions in hopes of surviving another day, hour, or even minute is the essence of adaptation. "Simple and brutal: a person can get used to anything, even killing" (185). Knowing the only way to survive in the open ocean is to abandon and at the same time reconcile his identity as a vegan Hindu and consume the flesh of another creature is a testament to Pi's willingness to act and adapt. Survival for

Pi has reconstructed much more than his name. An entire new persona has emerged with his survival. He is an orphan, an only child, an alpha male, and now a killer who consumes the flesh of the creatures he kills. If all things are indeed connected, this consumption of flesh would make Pi a cannibal as well. Killing and eating the flesh supports Pi's survival. What could be more simple and more brutal than kill and eat the kill or die? Pi is a far cry from Piscine. Pi moves forward in time and all the artifacts of Piscine are lost to another time and space.

Pi Patel is a survivor. He is intelligent, diligent, creative, and able to adapt. He not only had the will to survive but the willingness to act. He found a solution to change the way peers viewed him at school, and he found a way to survive in the open ocean for nearly a year. He changed his name from *Pissing* Patel to Pi Patel. That seemingly simple act demonstrated his strength of mind and perseverance. He calculated a plan and executed it perfectly, the plan to survive an unusual name and the plan to survive the disaster of losing everything. *The Life of Pi* is a story about life. Living life is adapting and surviving by calculating risks and making hard choices every day. Pi's circumstances were more extreme. His choices were more difficult. Taming a wild tiger and killing fish to have food are activities Pi never imagined would become commonplace. Even so, his story breaks down into the simple concept of either or, life or death, survival or demise, these represent choices. Adaptation represents choices. A series of good choices result in survival.

Pi changed his name, changed his identity, and embodied that new identity. These choices, these adaptations are the reason for his survival and his ability to tell his tale.



Photo by Ewan Robertson

Can't Ask Him

By Woody Brown

Stop assigning blame to the victim. Jorge is not the villain of this story. He is a poor schlub with severe autism. He is incapable of speech, so no one has any idea what he feels or thinks. No one ever bothered to give him an alternative means of communication. People can be very elitist when it comes to speech. If you can't communicate, it must mean that you are mentally retarded and can't possibly have anything of value to say. I wonder sometimes if Jorge might have been able to learn in school if someone had put an iPad in front of him. I have spent plenty of time with Jorge. I probably understand his predicament better than the people whose job it is to handle him. I may relate to Jorge on some level, but our baggage comes in different sizes. Jorge and I are both inmates at an insane asylum that passes itself off as a day program for autistic young adults. We have been in and out of each other's lives since special ed preschool. We graduated from different schools -- well, I graduated, he got a certificate of

completion. But there is only one place in this city for people like us to go after high school, so here we are. Reunited.

Jorge and I have shared space off and on for nearly 20 years but we have never had anything that resembles a conversation. That probably seems incredible to you, but it's standard operating procedure for nonspeakers. Jorge has adopted an admirable level of acceptance about his situation. He doesn't seem consumed by the frustration, anxiety and anger that tortures many other nonspeakers. Some of us are like tightly wound tops. With a flick of a wrist, we can spin and skitter out of control. Not Jorge. He falls into the category of gentle giant. The first thing you notice about Jorge is his immense size. He is tallish, but is as big around as he is up and down. He usually slumps and hangs his head, as if the act of being big ol' Jorge is a weighty burden. He is the least aggressive inmate – I should say client so you don't get the wrong idea – in this sad, boring place. He's too big to move with any conscious belligerence, and he's too gentle to get riled in the first place. Jorge presents only one behavioral challenge at Upward Bound, which is probably the most cynical name they could have given this dead-end waystation. Jorge is what they call an eloper. If you look away for an instant, Jorge is gone. He moves like a specter when no eyeballs are trained on him. This isn't a problem most of the time, the adult babysitters keep the doors locked in

this place. But when we go on our weekly field trips to Target, a staffer is assigned specifically to Jorge. Thankfully, I don't require this level of supervision.

I have observed this eloping inclination of Jorge over the years. You can see how helpful some kind of alternative communication technique would be in this situation. Hey Jorge! Why do you keep running off? What can we do to keep you in your prescribed location? If Jorge could point and type like me, we could get to the bottom of this dangerous mystery. As it turns out, no one at Upward Bound is trained in alternative communication. Not many people are, even in the schools. As much as I wish I could just type my thoughts independently, that's not how it works for most nonspeaking spellers. Our brains have trouble getting all the motor planning lined up to perform the complex actions involved in typed communication. Most people don't even consider how many parts of the brain are activated when they speak or type. If your electronic impulses resist firing in the right order, like mine and probably Jorge's, the message gets lost somewhere between the thought and the finger hitting the keyboard. A trained aide keeps the flow going and the disorganized brain on task, like a bridge or conduit that compensates for the autistic brain's funky wiring. Without a real communication partner, I am as mute as Jorge. Even if I knew with certainty why Jorge wanders

away and what our minders could do to keep him safe, I would have no means to tell them.

I don't get much intellectual stimulation here, so I have put effort into forming theories about Jorge's dilemma. Here's the most likely one. Jorge isn't running away from anything. (Although god knows I feel like dashing out screaming from this place a million times a day. But I have more self-control than that, and am able to play the model inmate.) Jorge doesn't mean to escape. He is going to something. There is something somewhere else that he wants to see or do. He can't express his need, so he just goes. The staffers have never even noticed that every time Jorge has eluded them in Target, they find him in the toy section looking at Mr. Potatohead. I have no idea what the spud's appeal is to Jorge. The compulsion is so strong that you can visibly see Jorge's brain thrumming as soon as our clown car pulls into the Target parking lot. If I could, I would tell the staffers to make the toy section our first stop and give poor Jorge his Potatohead time before his head explodes and he runs away.

You may be wondering why the hell someone like me is squandering his time here on earth at this godforsaken facility. All I ever wanted was an education. For me to get a high school diploma was considered an impossible dream. Severely autistic students are hidden away in the proverbial special ed

basement, where Math consists of learning how to make change and English means simple picture books. Teachers and aides in high school are bound by convention to dummy everything down to students like me. It's as if they had been trained that nonspeakers were ineducable. But I had a secret weapon. A ticket out of the basement. I had a mother who refused to accept the status quo. She taught me at home, keeping me abreast of grade level. She read the classics to me and taught me to point at letters. To the teachers and special ed administrators, my mother was a beast who made everyone consider me a student seeking a diploma and a future. She refused to let me cross the threshold of the basement cell, and demanded that I be included in the well-lit land of the learners. When I walked with my class and accepted the diploma that I had earned, my family cheered the loudest and my mother sobbed.

But what next? The supports fall off after high school, like training wheels that I still needed to stay upright and moving forward. My mom refused to give into the inevitability of Upward Bound. We had both worked too hard for me to submissively walk into the young adult version of the basement and concede that this was what my life was going to be. She and my dad agreed that she would quit her job and she would be my aide at community college. It was an experiment. I shocked even myself by being really good at college. Mom and I both enjoyed it,

and we were all thrilled when I was accepted as a transfer to UC Berkeley. My time there is another story. All through these exciting college years, I felt recognized and acknowledged for being capable. I majored in English because I love literature and I wanted to develop my writing skills. We had this vague idea that, after graduating college, Mom would assist me as I strove to write professionally. Perhaps I could produce a novel and become self-supporting. I wouldn't mind working at a menial job, but my body is so disorganized that I require constant supervision. Even vocational programs for autistic adults refused to take me on. Becoming a novelist was a long shot, but it gave us a goal. The alternative was day care. Something would surely happen. My English degree from Cal ought to keep me out of the insane asylum.

Something did happen. My dad, the most funny, loving person in the world, had a heart attack and died right after my graduation. It was so shocking and unwanted that my mom and I were completely paralyzed for a couple of months. My little family was a three-legged stool. Missing a leg meant that we tottered and fell in a heap on the floor. Our grief was such that we walked through our days like zombies. Mom would read to me a couple of times a day, distracting us with memories of when we read all day for my college classes, with Dad sticking his head in the door just to get some attention. Mom would pretend to be

aggravated by the disruption, but being annoying was Dad's schtick. He just loved us so much. Reading some random novel now, we would give anything for one of his silly interruptions.

Mom and I met with the lawyer and accountant. There was life insurance and whatnot, but it wasn't going to be enough to take care of us forever. I would have loved to have gotten an actual job, but the door to the working world was bolted from the inside. Mom resisted it hard, but she realized that she would have to go back to work. She couldn't get her old job back, but she got hired as an administrative assistant at the big hospital where I had been a patient over the years. She wept at the thought of what this meant for me. I'm not able to go unsupervised, despite my age and intellect. I am a walking contradiction. I can get so loud with my scripting and stimming and the volume of my electronics that neighbors call the police. Nonspeakers can't talk to policemen. There are plenty of stories of people like me being mishandled in interactions with authorities. I also fail to respond appropriately to other dangers, and I can't call 911. So we were forced to stick me at Upward Bound for my safety. We insisted to each other that it was temporary, that Mom would find a better place for me, where nonspeakers were respected and their communication facilitated. But adult day care is adult day care. No utopia has presented itself. I am stuck here for now, missing my dad,

bored and angry, with my diploma from Cal mocking me when I get home at the end of each day.

Upward Bound is located in a shabby, one-story building that used to be a nursing home. I guess even the old people thought it was too depressing. The inmates have to sign in at the front desk when they arrive in the morning, or someone does it for them. There are various rooms, patios and a dinky pool in the back, but most of the action (a term that applies very loosely) takes place in a large rec room in the center. Perhaps you can picture a nursing home rec room that hasn't been updated since the Carter administration. Old school linoleum, accordion dividers, metal folding chairs, cheesy decorations hung for whatever holiday just passed. They feed us breakfast, which usually consists of generic sugary cereal in a Styrofoam bowl. The schedule for the day is scribbled on a big whiteboard in hourly increments. It is one infantilizing activity after another. There could be an hour of gluing macaroni to popsicle sticks to make a picture frame. That is followed by an hour of a "cooking" activity where we make Chex Mix, which we eat for snack. There might be a walk across the street to the park, where we big-ass adults sit on swings or meander about. Lunch (even more processed and less nutritious than breakfast), playing games like Cootie or Connect 4, maybe a swim if it's warm. One day feels like forever.

Jorge, the other inmates and I were just marking time at Upward Bound under the not-very-watchful eyes of the young, underpaid staffers. I was older than most of them. Many were from the nearby community college (my former classmates, talk about irony). Some were full time, as if they couldn't find a better job. They were a mixed bag. Some tried to engage, some were bored and snuck their phones out of their pockets when the supervisor was out of the room. Sometimes there would be a staffer who took a shine to you and would hang out with you in particular. I attracted a few fans due to my intriguing, tragic circumstances, but turnover is high in crappy jobs like this, and none of my staffer pals lasted very long. I remember one very pretty girl, Darla, who's in law school now. She flirted with me, in the way a smart, well-intended girl tries to make the autistic guy feel like he could actually have a girlfriend some day. It wasn't real, but attention from a pretty girl makes the time go by a little faster. I didn't blame her for leaving. Staffers here have to put up with some tough stuff. Their duties included changing diapers, cleaning poop and vomit, and dealing with meltdowns. It's one thing when the population is tiny kids, but when the soiled underpants belong to a severely autistic adult, many of the staffers decide that working at McDonalds would be less of a hassle.

Jorge got lucky. He developed a bond with a guy named Carlos, who was a little older than the average zookeeper around here. Jorge and Carlos even looked a little alike. Both were big and soft, neither was demanding, nor were they ever cranky. They would just naturally seek each other out in the group, and sit together like a couple of satisfied buddhas. If there was a small group activity, like playing Hungry Hungry Hippos or making puppets out of paper bags, Carlos always had Jorge in his section. Unlike most of the staffers who were on their way somewhere else, Carlos seemed like a lifer. He looked as if he actually enjoyed the work. He didn't have his heart set on some other more respectable, better paying career. He liked it just fine at Upward Bound. Carlos told me and Jorge one day that he had saved up enough to buy a kayak. He had a group of friends who were into outdoorsy things, and he enjoyed being out on the water with them. I entertained myself with fantasies of being one of Carlos' outdoorsy friends. I don't know if Jorge did that, but the gentle bear loved to hear Carlos tell stories about his weekend of hiking or kayaking.

I admit that I had unflattering feelings of jealousy when I observed moments of connection between Carlos and Jorge. It wasn't just that they naturally drifted towards one another during activities. Or that Carlos had eyes in the back of his head, looking out in case one of the bullying guys snarked at Jorge.

Not all of us here are nonspeaking, and some use their powers of speech for evil.

There was one day when a mean jerk was mocking Jorge mercilessly. The jerk probably gets crap from typical guys all the time, but here he's an alpha dog and he takes out his frustration on guys who are weaker and can't answer back. Carlos came out of nowhere and moved in on the bully. He's not allowed to manhandle the clients, but he has this zen way of getting in between oppressor and oppressed and de-escalating a tense situation. He drew the bully away and quietly corrected him, allowing him to save face, while Jorge slumped off. That wasn't what made me feel envious. It was a half-hour later. I saw Jorge sitting with his head down, and Carlos was sitting next to him, not saying anything, not even looking directly at him. He was just there. It was a static tableau that communicated in an instant the entire scope of their relationship. Jorge takes comfort in Carlos, and Carlos comprehends what Jorge needs without language coming between them.

Imagine how ridiculous it was for me to be envious of Jorge, who couldn't even type, much less sit and learn in a proper classroom. My college degree looked small and useless in the light that emanated from this contented pair of souls. I used to have two people that I was bonded with, but one of them died.

One day not long ago, Jorge showed up in obvious distress. He arrives every morning on a short bus, so there was no family member who could brief the staff on what might have precipitated this unusual level of agitation. In case you're curious, my mother never allowed them to transport me on the short bus, even though it's a funded service. She always said it was about keeping me safe, but I also think it was about maintaining dignity. The fact that "short bus" is used in the vernacular as synonymous with "retarded" is part of it. But it is also a great challenge to be stuck in a small space filled with autistic adults who are rocking, flapping and vocalizing. Even if I am one of them. Most Upward Bound families took advantage of the bus. No one could say why Jorge was upset that day. I noticed that Jorge kept trying to get into the closet where they keep the toys. A lot of adults with autism like toys that you're used to seeing in a preschooler's toy chest. I am pretty subtle about it, but there might be a bin or three of Thomas the Tank Engine and his friends in my room at home. What happens in my room stays in my room. No big deal. So I had an understanding of why Jorge was clawing at the locked closet door that morning. He was in a terrible mood for whatever reason, and he really needed some quality time with Mr. Potatohead.

Carlos saw Jorge struggling and came over to help. He knew Jorge well enough to understand his objective in that moment. There's a rule against

opening the Pandora's box of the toy closet when it's not the scheduled activity, but Carlos could see that it was becoming an emergency situation. He pulled out his ring of keys, and the clinking sound alerted the other inmates. An excited little crowd gathered around him. Carlos was trying to tell the others that he was just getting a Potatohead for Jorge, but everybody had a comfort item in that closet. Carlos opened the door just a crack and the others started to push in with anxious arms. Jorge smelled a threat. Moving at the speed of light, he yanked the special spud off the shelf and was out the rec room door before Carlos could register it. Another short bus had arrived and the door to the outside was propped open for a wheelchair. As big as he was, Jorge slipped through the gauntlet and was down the sidewalk in a stealthy dash. I followed to see what would happen. I wanted to be a human breadcrumb for Carlos to follow. He was still extricating himself from the scrum of toy grabbers. Finally Carlos rushed past me into the street, but Jorge was already down the block.

Jorge didn't go far, he wasn't running away. He just needed some space and privacy to commune with Potatohead. He ran across the busy street to the little park. He sat on a parking berm and held on tight to the toy. Carlos was not far behind. A passing police car had to slam on its brakes to avoid hitting Jorge. The police car turned around and faced Jorge in the parking lot. The police got out

of their car and were asking questions of Jorge that Jorge could not answer. Jorge was rocking back and forth, clutching the toy to his belly and emitting a disturbing shriek. Carlos was waiting for cars to pass before he could dash across to the park. Carlos could see that the cops had their hands poised over their guns. He started yelling at the police to back off as he ran across the street. Carlos approached Jorge from the side and tried to calm him down. The cops were barking loud orders at them, which only escalated Jorge's behavior. Jorge suddenly lifted up his hands to cover his ears, Potatohead still tightly gripped. Carlos quickly moved in to protect Jorge. Only God knows why the younger cop panicked at this sight. He drew his gun and fired at Jorge. What harm did he think Jorge going to do with a plastic tuber? The cop's bullet missed Jorge and hit Carlos. Seeing he missed, the cop fired two more shots at the two big men. One bullet hit Carlos again, another wound up in a play structure behind them. The whole thing was over in seconds.

Carlos lay bleeding in the parking lot. Jorge was flailing. The Upward Bound director and other staffers ran up and tried to explain. The cop who hadn't fired called for an ambulance. Things moved quickly at that point. The ambulance arrived and took Carlos away. We later learned that he passed away on the way to the hospital. Despite the director's assurances that Jorge was not a psycho, just autistic, the police took him on a 5150, a 72-hour psychiatric hold. I don't actually

know what happened to Jorge after that. When my mom heard about the shooting, she rushed over to pick me up. She hustled me out of the building in the chaos, not even bothering to sign me out. My mom kept saying, “Never. You’ll never have to go back there. I swear.” I think she had been feeling really guilty about me being in here, and this was the shock she needed to switch up our grief-made plan.

So now we are back at home, licking our many wounds and trying to figure out the next step. Mom spends most of the day – when she’s not reading to me – researching day programs and residential facilities across the country. We don’t need to stay where we are. A change of location sounds pretty good right now. The story of Jorge and Carlos made its way onto social media for a while. People were rightly horrified by the incident, but the shooter received no consequences. What really hurt was the sector of internet haters who said despicable things about Jorge. It was Jorge’s fault Carlos was killed. Freaks like Jorge shouldn’t be allowed near our homes or in our parks. People like Jorge (or me, I guess) should be shipped off to an institution where they can’t bother the rest of us. Of course, the language they used on Twitter was not so civilized. Forget those pie-in-the-sky theories about inclusion. We don’t fit in, and my college degree didn’t change a

thing. Jorge and I and the other inmates face a battle for the right to exist adjacent to the rest of society.

One of the things I am worried about is whether manmade barriers can be toppled. Maybe there is a ladder I can use. Back to the drawing board.



Third of May 1808, Francisco Goya